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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses critical questions concerning the educational needs of African American students with behavior disorders. These include: the historical context; effects of reform and restructuring movements on this population; the unresolved issue of defining "seriously emotionally disturbed" or "emotional or behavior disorder"; the failure of special education to meet the needs of these students; various models of intervention programs (including the psychodynamic, biophysical, environmental, humanistic, behavioral, and cognitive learning models); the critical importance of saving African American youth in the 21st century; and the need for research, policy, and practice to be integrated and focus on understanding and meeting individual student needs. Contains 34 references. (DB)

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The Education of African-American Learners with Behavior Disorders: An Unresolved Issue for General and Special Educators

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Abstract

Changes that occur daily continue to reflect cultural, socio-economic and political trends in American society. New legislations have been instituted to address the needs of atypical students. To African-American students with behavior disorders, these legislations have "scratched the snake but not killed it." In other words, some critical questions remain unanswered by educators and service providers working with African-American students. What historical impacts have affected the education of African-American students? How have recent reform and restructuring movements addressed educational needs of African-American learners? What is the state of affairs today? How can research, theory and practice come to terms in meeting the needs of African-American learners with behavior disorders? This article answers these questions while providing perspectives for future practice.

The Education of African-American Students with Behavior Disorders:

An Unresolved Issue for General and Special Educators

> The number of ads from the National Education Association tells us that the teaching profession is doing its job; it is not. We are not doing our best as a profession to tap the unlimited resources children bring into the classroom across the nation. The teaching profession has too many problems to devote its attention to the real job that is preparing our youth to compete and be leaders in a changing society . . . . The profession will never take full blame for the lack of quality, lack of integrity and lack of ethics. It implies the false assumption that if children fail to learn, the fault must be with them rather than the schools. Yet schools that place the blame for students' failure on their "poor home environment" or "lack of motivation" do not hesitate to take credit when these same students succeed. Even our excuses are mediocre. We need to stop pointing to others. We are failing our children and ourselves. (Sullivan, Walko & DiSibio, 1990, p. 73)

The present article concentrates on issues raised by Sullivan, Walko and DiSibio (1990). We are constantly reminded that we are living at a tumultuous time. Changes are occurring daily, and societal demographics are changing at a startling pace. New legislation is promulgated to respond to the needs of atypical individuals; and schools are continually challenged to respond to new reform and restructuring movements. African-American students with behavior disorders offer challenges and constraints in today's education. Many critical questions remain

unanswered. What historical impacts have affected the education of African-American students? How have recent reform and restructuring movements addressed educational needs of African-American learners? How useful have present definitions, theories and models been in the remediation process of African-American students with behavior disorders? How is it possible for research, theory and practice to come to terms in serving the needs of African-American learners? This article answers these questions while providing perspectives for future practice.

Historical Overview

> Real pedagogical power means that all children reach a high level of achievement on criterion-based standards. It means that all children who may have disabilities receive sophisticated, valid services that cause them to do better than they would have done if they had not received special services at all. (Hilliard, 1992, p. 168)

The above statement by Hilliard (1992) leads to one major intriguing question, i.e., How and why did "real pedagogical power" deteriorate in spite of efforts through advocacy, legislation and litigation to educate African-American students? To provide some answers, I will discuss impacts of history on the education of students with atypical skills and behaviors.

Early Impact

Jean Marc Itard, the French physician believed in "real pedagogical power" when he decided to take on the task of educating the "wild boy" of Aveyron, France in the late 18th century. Even the "wild boy" was able to acquire some skills. In the early parts of the 20th century, Dr. Alfred Binet began to develop what is known today as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. He warned against excessive reliance on his intelligent quotient tool, yet researchers and educators have continued to use it to quantify human intelligence and survival. In speaking about his special class, Binet (1909) noted that students' intelligence can be developed or improved. He added, "It is in this parochial sense, the only one accessible to us, that we say that intelligence of these children has been increased. We have increased what constitutes the intelligence of a pupil: the capacity to learn and to assimilate instruction" (p. 104). Apparently, Binet, one of the architects of intelligence testing, believed in the developmental stage-by-stage growth of children. Gould (1981) argued that "if Binet's principles had been followed, and his tests consistently used as he intended, we would have been spared a major misuse of science in our century" (p. 155). The question is, Will this misuse of science for

African-American students continue in the 21st century?

Today, many African-American youth are jailed in facilities similar to institutions of yesteryears. The presumption is that putting them in jail will alter the violence in our schools and streets. It is becoming increasingly clear that jails have become training arenas for criminals rather than correctional facilities. Around the mid-20th century, significant progress was made in the education of individuals with exceptionalities. The significant factors which led to this progress include (1) parental activism, (2) professional research on deviant growth and development, and (3) changes in teacher education practices. The Brown versus the School Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas case of 1954 was a landmark case with far-reaching implications for African-Americans and individuals with exceptionalities. The 1964 Civil Rights Act institutionalized the rights of all citizens, irrespective of their capabilities or incapabilities. Based on today's educational problems, we have seen our freedoms abused, misinterpreted and misused; and everyone has continued to blame everyone without accepting responsibility. Apparently, 40 years after the Brown decision and 30 years after the Civil Rights Act, issues related to segregation, desegregation, quality and equity of African-American learners still haunt educators and service providers.

Later Impact

The 1970s through the 1990s created a total mobilization period for individuals with exceptionalities. The passage of Public Law (PL) 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act) in 1975 was crucial for programs for individuals with problem behaviors, emotional disturbances or behavioral disorders. This law stipulated zero rejection of students with disabilities and total service delivery to these persons.

In 1986, PL 99-457, an amendment of PL 94-142 was promulgated to provide basic ingredients for early intervention and parent-professional partnerships. In 1990, PL 101-336 (Americans with Disabilities Act) was established to challenge the business sector to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. Also, in 1990, PL 94-142 was reauthorized as PL 101-476 (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA) to address in more emphatic ways the needs of exceptional individuals (e.g., the replacement of the term, "handicap" with "disability"). This means an individual can be disabled or impaired and not handicapped.

Even with all these efforts, too many educators appear to have unethically skewed these important legislative efforts to either suit their selfish ends or ignore the needs of African-Americans. For example, many

view these legislations as funding laws that are of little relevance to helping learners with atypical skills and behavior disorders to maximize their potential in school and in life. While adults play this game, our youth suffer. There is consensus about the apparent lack of ethics in schools and communities. In accordance with this assertion, Calabrese (1989) wrote:

> The failure to make ethics a priority has a direct impact on society in general and young people in particular. The school, as it continues to assume functions once formally held by the family has the potential and responsibility to train young people to act ethically. However, before schools can assume this function, they must view themselves as ethical institutions and allow ethics to be the driving force behind all decisions and interpersonal actions. The demand to incorporate the teaching of ethics in schools should be consistent and equal to the demand to strengthen the academic program. (p. 39)

Reform and Restructuring Movements

The launching of Sputnik in October 1957 by the Russians was an important historical event that forced the United States government to initiate remarkable reforms in educational programs. Teachers were re-educated and students were challenged to discover and use their gifts and talents. The focus was on learning through discovery. Dr. Jerome Bruner, the Chairperson of the group of educators and scientists formed to respond to this new initiative, became the famous proponent of the discovery theory

(see Bruner's 1963 book, The Process of Education). Since then, many reform programs have been initiated, sometimes not for African-American students' interests but for political aggrandizement. A good example is the National Commission on Excellence in Education which was instituted in 1983 to respond to the issue of "quality" in schools. As this Commission (1983) pointed out, "The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to the new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life" (p. 7).

A few years later, the U.S. Department of Education (1991) had a similar idea in its book, America 2000: An Education Strategy when it emphasized "excellence" and "quality" and failed to recognize those human attributes needed to enhance quality relationships in our society (Obiakor, 1993). Concurrent with governmental reforms are calls for the education of all atypical students in regular classroom programs. This call has been extended to full inclusion of all students to foster school and community cooperation, collaboration, consultation and partnership at all levels of a student's education (Council for Exceptional Children, 1993).

On March 31, 1994, President Bill Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Supposedly, this Act will go a long way to remediate our educational problems. The U.S. Department of Education (1994) acknowledged that:

> American education is in crisis. Our schools are not meeting the needs of students or the demands of our economy for a more skilled, more adaptable workforce. And many vocational education and job training programs don't equip beginning or experienced workers with the skills needed for success in the workplace. Without comprehensive education reform across America, our nation's economic strength is in jeopardy. (p. 1)

Apparently, we are constantly looking for innovative answers to basic problems that confront our students, especially those from ethnically diverse cultures. The problem is these answers tend to be politically motivated--these answers sometimes lack common sense. According to Algozzine, Maheady, Sacca, O'Shea and O'Shea (1990), "We are not convinced that the cause of our field's condition is so promising that we cannot freely offer any medicine, even those available without prescriptions that may not as yet be doctor-tested" (p. 556). Following the same premise, Goodlad (1993) wrote:

> We appear incapable of getting beyond individuals as the units of assessment with the accompanying allocation of responsibility for success and failure. We must adopt as

> standard practice the kind of contextual appraisal that tells whether schools have in place the curriculum, materials, pedagogy, and other conditions necessary to the good education of individuals. The absence of these exposes glaring inequities that are the moral responsibility of a caring people in a just society to correct. (p. 20)

Definition: The Unresolved Issue

The term "problem behaviors" is used to encompass unlimited variety of behaviors. Traditionally, students are identified as having behavior disorders by teachers, parents, guardians and service providers when they find behaviors in conflict with their upbringings or personal idiosyncrasies. Put another way, behaviors are problems to us when we do not like those behaviors or persons. It is no surprise that African-American students who exhibit problem behaviors are called "problems," "trouble-makers," "bad kids," "violent students," "deprived students," and "disordered students." This means the society imposes its idea of what is good or bad without regard for an individual's "acte gratuit" or freedom. In other words, there is an apparent failure to recognize what is in vogue in a society might be inappropriate in another society. The enigmatic question then is, Can an African-American student be "bad" in one class situation and "good" in another class situation?

IDEA uses the term "seriously emotionally disturbed" to explain

individuals with problem behaviors. As Dice (1993) pointed out, IDEA recognizes problem behaviors that have taken place "over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance" (p. 4). This definition sounds reasonable; however, it has attracted a marked degree of controversy. At the 1993 Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) International Convention, there was a proposal for a new definition. The Council for Children with Behavior Disorders (CCBD) (1993) presented the new definition as follows:

> A. The term "emotional or behavior disorder" means a disability that is . . .
> i. characterized by behavioral and emotional responses in school programs so different from appropriate age, culture, or ethnicity;
> ii. more than a temporary, expected response to stressful events in the environment;
> iii. consistently exhibited in two different settings, at least one of which is school-related; and
> iv. unresponsive to direct intervention applied in general education, or the condition of a children is such that general education interventions would be insufficient.
> B. The term includes such a disability that co-exists with other disabilities.
> C. The term includes a schizophrenic disorder, affective disorder, anxiety disorder, or other sustained disorder of conduct or adjustment, affecting a child, if the disorder affects educational performance as described in paragraph (i). (pp. 1-2)

The CCBD's 1993 definition is a good effort to identify individuals

with problem behaviors or behavior disorders. It appears, however, that different professionals, schools, communities and societies have divergent interpretations of what a problem behavior is. While these interpretations rage on, effective strategies that will help African-American youth in today's complex society are not addressed in an in-depth fashion. The question is (and should be), How can general and special educators best meet the needs of African-American learners in spite of definitional struggles of different professionals?

The State of Affairs

It appears that legislation and litigation meant to respond to individual differences amongst people have been ineffective (Goodlad & Lovitt, 1993; Kauffman, 1993; Obiakor, 1992). While general and special educators continue to struggle for definitions, theoretical orientations and methods, societal problems such as senseless violence, gang wars, drug abuse, drug dealing, self-defeatism and lack of citizenship increase. In various communities, negative actions of some of our youth are in the limelight. Many citizens have advocated stricter jail terms, politicians have jumped on the bandwagon, and police departments across the nation are enforcing strict laws. As O'Brien (1991) pointed out:

> Parents trying to raise respectful children today, unfortunately, have to do it in a disrespectful world. Brutal and hostile acts are shown in nightly television, profane, vulgar and irrelevant language is used routinely in the media; greed and selfishness are revealed in important and prominent people, role models are too outrageous or too perfect to be taken seriously. (p. 183)

O'Brien's (1991) statement reveals the confusion apparent in today's changing society. Should the society continue to build more jails and incarcerate more young African-American men and women? Should the society engage in actions that are tentamount to the euthanasia of its future generation? Should the society give up on African-American youth? Or, should the society educate African-American youth? As we approach the 21st century, the directions for African-American youth must be education and more re-education at all educational levels.

Many years ago, Hobbs (1974, 1975a, 1975b) advocated re-education in place of institutionalization of students with emotional problems and behavior disorders. This commitment was apparent when the CEC (1993) reiterated that all students, irrespective of their ethnicities, disabilities and problems are entitled "to a free and appropriate education and/or services that leads to an adult life characterized by satisfying relations with others, independent living, productive engagement in the community, participation

in society at large" (p. 11).

It is reasonable to argue that general and special educators have somehow failed African-American students, especially those with problem behaviors, emotional disturbances and behavior disorders. These failures have been apparent in the (a) identification, (b) assessment, (c) placement in the least restrictive environment, (d) individualized education instruction or programming, and (e) adaptation to change and reform (Obiakor, 1993; Obiakor, Algozzine & Ford, 1993). General and special educators have directly or indirectly fallen prey to reforms (Cuban, 1984, 1990; Kauffman, 1993; Kauffman, Kameenui, Birman, & Danielson, 1990). In addition, there has been a rat race for easy solutions rather than "hard thinking that brings about advances in theory, applications and practice" (Kauffman, et al., p. 114).

Coming to Terms: From Theory to Practice

Theories reflect conceptualizations and models that in turn foreshadow interventions and pedagogy. The following models are frequently used in most intervention classrooms and/or programs dealing with problem behaviors, behavior disorders or emotional disturbances:

1. Psychodynamic Model -- This model has evolved from the

intrapsychic phenomenon espoused by Sigmund Freud. It is a connection of theoretical constructs which denotes an eclectic use of ideas and activities (e.g., the use of play, drama and art therapy to reduce inappropriate behaviors.)

2. Biophysical Model -- This model emphasizes the organic origins of human behavior (e.g., the use of medical or biochemical techniques to remediate problem behaviors).
3. Environmental Model -- This model connects the dominant theme in contemporary studies of human behaviors. Here, we find the sociological model (the way the society sees the individual) and ecological model (the way the individual interacts with the society) (e.g., the reduction of environmental problems goes a long way to reduce some inadequate behavioral patterns).
4. Humanistic Model -- This model is very student-centered. There is no structure and no judgement; and the focus is on sensitivity or empathy (e.g., incorporating sensitivity and active listening can enhance students' and parents' participation).

5. Behavioral Model -- This model discloses behavior changes that are observable and measurable (e.g., the use of behavior modification techniques can be reinforcing to appropriate behaviors).

6. Cognitive Learning Model -- This model assumes that an individual's perception of environmental stimulus affects behavior changes. It is integrative in nature because humanism and behaviorism interface and interplay (e.g., the use of self-responsibility and Glasser's Reality Therapy can be effective in behavior management).

Based on these models and theoretical orientations, intervention and/or teaching strategies are organized. These models reflect the divergent theoretical orientations of various professionals working with persons with problem behaviors or behavior disorders. Controversies evident in definitions are intertwined in theories and intervention strategies. For instance, when a teacher is a trained behaviorist, he/she downplays other strategies and finds it difficult to use them to address the needs of African-American students. Since it is common knowledge students' behaviors are complex, what sense does it make to use a simple

approach to ameliorate a complex multidimensional problem? Teachers and practitioners find themselves in this precarious position. Again, African-American learners suffer while teachers and service providers debate about models and methods.

It is apparent the best strategy should be one which works for a particular African-American student taught by a particular educator or service provider at a particular time in a particular place . Based on this knowledge, Schrag (1993) explained "the population of students being served within special education programs today and in the future is changing, which requires closer integration and coordination of services within the educational system and with a broader array of health and social services" (p. 208). Two questions come to mind: Are teachers really trained to use divergent models or strategies with their African-American students? If departmentalization and turfs are often realities in Colleges of Education, how, then, can teacher educators teach respect for individual differences or diversity of viewpoints amongst students and faculty? Roche (1990) confirmed that:

> Often, educators are isolated from the real concerns of communities around them--it is not only important to teach others the knowledge and related skills necessary for their professional lives, but it is imperative that educators prepare

> graduates for specific areas of concern within their own communities and with the skills and motivation they will need to address them satisfactorily. (p. 32)

It has been well-documented that negative teachers produce negative students. Teachers need to view themselves as change-agents. The rat-race for reforms is not the answer. According to Kauffman (1993), "Most reform movements in education have led to disappointment and a predictable reversal of direction, rather than to progress--the familiar phenomenon described as a cycle, pendulum, or wave" (p. 6). Teachers need to believe African-American students with behavior disorders can be educated--these students need teachers who believe in them and those who believe in utilizing divergent techniques to manage their behaviors, when necessary. As Walker and Shea (1991) pointed out:

> Behavior management is a complex problem that cannot be approached from a simplistic point of view. It is a teacher function that must be studied, planned, and objectively used and evaluated, with equal emphasis given to all relevant variables: an individual or group whose behavior is being studied; the behavior under consideration; the setting in which the behavior occurs; the individual applying the intervention; and the purpose of the intervention. A specific technique that is an effective intervention for one specific behavior of one specific child in a particular setting may be ineffective under another set of circumstances when applied by a different individual to change a different behavior. More specifically, behavior management must be individualized. (p. 6)

As general and special educators come to terms with theory and practice, their premier priority must be to start looking at African-American students from a developmental perspective. It is cost effective to educate African-American students and to see them as individuals who have potential to succeed. Not long ago, Hilliard (1992) suggested the following strategic imperatives for general and special educators:

1. We must assume that children's thinking can be changed significantly. We do not know their upper limits.
2. We are interested in processes of thinking and how they can be changed, rather than in the product for comparative purposes (ranking and classification).
3. We must require that any system that is employed be able to produce significant and meaningful change in students' cognitive and academic functioning.
4. We should, given the existence of a successful system, have a theoretical explanation of it. (p. 170)

Saving African-American Youth in the 21st Century

There are indications that the 21st century struggles will be different from struggles that took place in previous decades. But, are general and special educators ready to confront this change? Or, will these educators allow themselves to be consumed by this change? The American society has continued to witness its youth engage in self-destructive actions, senseless violence, killings, gang wars, drug abuse and

drug dealing. Many communities have engaged in self-denials--they have tried to downplay these problems. In fact, many rural areas of the United States still pretend they are puritanic communities not confronting these problems. Today, many communities have initiated laws that have resulted in police brutality across the nation. More jails have been built to contain the criminals. Many of our future generation have been incarcerated.

Apparently, responses to problems confronting American youth have been retrogressive. Many educational reform programs have emphasized "quality" and "excellence" rather than common-sense approaches that work for African-American youth. Many more measurement tools have been designed to quantify intellectual and social capabilities. African-American parents have been blamed for failures of some of their children in school programs. In addition, race and socio-economic factors have been blamed for problems confronting schools and the American society. Many Americans have blamed these problems on the lack of values and morality--many individuals have advocated a punitive system of education with religion as its base. These simplistic views have failed to understand the changing nature of the American

society. The reality is we are living at a tumultuous time. While we continue to pass the buck, young African-American men and women are revolting at a fast pace. Signs of their silent (and sometimes violent) revolution are seen all around the American society. The society must agree something is wrong; and something needs to be changed. Toffler (1982) challenged the society more than a decade ago when he wrote:

> The responsibility for change, therefore, lies with us. We must begin with ourselves, teaching ourselves not to close our minds prematurely to the novel, the surprising, the seemingly radical. This means fighting off idea assassins who rush forward to kill any new suggestion on grounds of its impracticality, while defending whatever now exists as practical, no matter who absurd, oppressive, or unworkable it may be. It means fighting for freedom of expression, the right to voice their ideas even if heretical. (p. 443)

Toffler's 1982 statement challenges special educators and other professionals involved in the educational process of African-American youth. General and special educators cannot continue to use simplistic unidimensional assumptions that are deficit-oriented. Many years ago, Weikert (1977) warned that the deficit model, when applied to a certain population, "seems to limit potential assistance to that group because it channels thinking in ways that emphasize weaknesses rather than strengths, and it interprets differences from the norm as individual

deficits" (p. 75).

As a matter of urgency, general and special educators need to stop assigning worth to African-American students by measuring intelligence as a single quantity. They need to stop misusing standardized instruments for classification, categorization and placement of African-American students. It is nonproductive to assume that African-American students have low or negative self-concepts. White-collar criminals are escaping without punishment--today, service to humanity is not honored the way it should; but corruption and material wealth are honored. African-American youth need realistic role models, not just role models. There should be emphasis on sensitivity, cultural acceptance and human attributes which a changing society desperately needs. By the same token, young African-American men and women need to understand that self-love and self-empowerment are honorable attributes. We cannot continue to pass the buck. Minton and Schneider (1985) agreed that:

> We cannot limit ourselves to the identification of trait dimensions or typological classifications across individuals without also considering the characteristics of the environments within which individuals function. Nor can we limit ourselves to an analysis of the environmental determinants of human differences without also considering the hereditary determinants. Finally, we have to ask ourselves what kind of society is most desirable for the

> expression of human diversity--for the opportunity for each of us to grow as individuals and at the same time not infringe on the rights of others to develop their own individuality. (p. 489)

Making Sense of Research

The implications of Minton and Schneider's 1985 statement are far-reaching for research, policy and practice. First, research that focuses on behavior disorders of African-American youth needs to address measures that will help us to understand them. When we understand them, we assist them to be functional, goal-directed decision makers in our complex society. Put another way, research that focuses on underlying pathological attributes of African-American students needs to be avoided because such a research is deficit-oriented and lacks measurable or observable attributes. Second, research, policy and practice ought to go hand-in-glove. Keogh (1990) noted that "from this perspective policy should follow research, and change should be found in evidence" (p. 186). It is apparent something is wrong with our intervention strategies for African-American learners with problem behaviors, behavior disorders and emotional disturbances. Third, research that divorces itself from the fundamental principles of individualized instructional programming fails to appreciate individual differences in people.

Our societal demographics are changing in the United States; and our world is getting smaller. We need redirection in our research projects. Research studies with skewed divisive political underpinnings must be discouraged. Any research that does not lend itself to common-sense interpretation and practice must be avoided. As Keogh indicated:

> Our belief in equity and our need to redress previous wrongs are strong reasons for initiating educational reforms. Now that the goals are established, the questions center around how to accomplish them, and it is here that educational researchers have a major role to play. (p. 189)

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed the education of African-American youth with behavior disorders as an unresolved issue. In many ways, I attempted to challenge general and special educators to revisit identifying procedures, assessment techniques and instructional strategies needed by African-American students. I also attempted to see what history can teach us. I understand clearly that if we revisit our past, there is a high probability that we will reduce past mistakes and make changes about our present and future. Historically, we have spent our energies debating about definitions, theories and intervention models while African-American youth suffer. We have almost become slaves to definitions, models of

intervention, and reform programs. Apparently, we have divorced ourselves from common-sense approaches that work. The unrealistic focus has been on "quality" education while ignoring human attributes and ethics necessary to reduce tension in a changing complex society.

This article has reaffirmed the belief that African-American youth are not beyond redemption. Strategies that empower our youth should be developed if we are to survive in the 21st century. According to Boyles (1990), "Assessment tools, special knowledge about programs and operations, research information, and other such things are more routinely provided once the basic relationships and expectations among people are defined for collaboration" (p. 13). It is time we started realigning ourselves, as educators, with the notion of "real" inclusive classrooms, schools, and communities. This means effective teaching of African-American students must be fostered through collaboration, consultation, and partnership of all persons involved. In the words of Obiakor, Algozzine and Ford (1993):

> Effective teaching is characterized by an orderly school climate, a well-planned and implemented instruction, a concern for academic excellence, and high expectations for all students. Such characteristics are especially important for students with histories of failure in school; they represent ideals inherent in the curriculum goals and instructional

practices of special education. (p. 324)

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